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The Interactive Basis of Ritual Effectiveness in a Male Initiation Rite

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From the participants' standpoint, "effectiveness" constitutes an integral part of what ritual behaviour is about. This is particularly evident in the case of rites of passage, whose execution is explicitly held to bring about change. Indeed, a defining characteristic of such rites is that before and after are patently not the same: persons until then single become married, children are rendered capable of assuming adult roles, princes are installed as kings, etc. Inasmuch as such transformations provide the necessary (and sometimes sufficient) grounds for legitimately undertaking certain distinctive activities, claiming certain privileged rights and responsibilities, etc., the issue of the participants' commitment to these changes is a particularly crucial one. I will be concerned here with some of the implications of this commitment, both as a constraint upon ritual form and as a component of ritual meaning.

The material I will draw upon concerns the initiation rite *So* of the Beti of Southern Cameroon, the undertaking of which is a necessary requisite to assuming the rightful prerogatives of adult manhood in this society¹. Following their initiation, usually several years after puberty or later (a domestic-scale circumcision rite occurs around eight years of age), young men are authorized to marry, participate (albeit as junior members) in the decisions of the adult community, engage in certain ritual activities (ancestor cult groups, subsequent *So* initiations, etc), eat certain foods (most notably fatty meats) strictly prohibited to women, children and uninitiated men (e.g. servants, slaves), etc. Not only does this ritual mark a radical change for the individuals who undergo it, but

¹ The Beti are an Ewondo-speaking population of approximately 100,000 persons, most of whom live along the paths and roads that criss-cross the equatorial rain forest of Southern Cameroon. They are patrilineal, (patri-)viri-local, polygamous hoe-agriculturalists (cocoa is cultivated as a cash-crop). Politically acephalous, they are divided into close to fifty localized exogamous clan groups. For an account of Beti ethno-history, see Laburthe-Tolra (1981); for an analysis of Beti social organization see Houseman (1982).

also, the distinction between those who have "fallen", "eaten" or "known" the *So* and those who have not, constitutes a recurrent discriminatory reference intervening in a variety of domains.

It is, however, remarkably difficult to define the unnamed categories INITIATED and UNINITIATED. On the one hand, they seem to at once cut across and overlap with a series of other, highly significant, distinctions (MAN/WOMAN, ADULT/CHILD, BETI/FOREIGN, etc.) remaining all the while clearly irreducible to them. Thus, although only (Beti) males becomes initiates, as such they are radically distinguished from all of those, male and female, child and adult, Beti and non-Beti alike, who have not "eaten the *So*". On the other hand, attributes apparently specific to these categories: knowing or not knowing certain things, eating or not eating certain foods, being able or not to marry certain persons (the children of men initiated together cannot marry), etc., refer to the equally irreducible fact of having or having not undergone initiation. In this way, it would seem that ordinary experience, on its own, cannot account for the INITIATED/UNINITIATED opposition. To do so, it is necessary to consider the ritual itself.

In the development that follows, I will be concerned less with ritual symbolism *per se*, that is, with the explicitation of implicit significations relating to other domains (e.g. Turner 1967), than with a number of "obvious aspects" (Rappaport 1979 *passim*) of the ritual performance itself. Specifically, I will try to show how certain organizational features of this performance, in contributing to the persuasiveness of the transformation it is supposed to effect, establish for the participants the well-foundedness of the INITIATED/UNINITIATED dichotomy. Here, the term "participants" refers to all those who effectively intervene in its performance, as well as, in a wider sense, to those who situate themselves and are situated by others as possible actors. In the present instance, the three categories of participants envisaged (the initiators, the candidates and the uninitiated) include, at least in theory, everyone.

Recently, a number of authors dealing with similar issues have stressed the role of particular modes of communication in ritual: dance, music, stylized verbal intonation, song, etc. (see e.g. Bloch 1974, Kapferer 1979b, Schifflin 1985). Unfortunately, the *So* ritual, outlawed since 1905, can no longer be witnessed first-hand. This has led me to focus on more readily accessible if more elemental phenomena, on the prescribed interactions between the various categories of participants (see Handelman 1990 for a comparable approach). In keeping with this

perspective, initiation is treated here as a complex, higher-order, *form of relationship* which has three main effects:

(i) it operates a change in the pattern of relationship between the initiated and the candidates and

(ii) operates another, concomitant change in the relationship between the candidates and the uninitiated;

(iii) it reiterates the existing pattern of relationship between initiated and uninitiated. The "performative" dimensions of ritual, accountable in terms of an implicit discursive model (e.g. Tambiah 1981), are regarded here as subordinate to this dynamic, which implies the global coordination of behavioral (and conceptual) disparities. The inspiration for this approach is mainly Batesonian (1972, 1979).

The initial section describes the different phases of the *So* ritual. A second section identifies the overall relational scheme in which the candidates' transition from the state of MALE CHILDREN to that of INITIATED MEN is acted out. A third section shows how certain key-events render this enacted change undeniable. A final section briefly considers certain implications of the proposed analysis.

The phases of the *So* ritual²

As in the case of many other Beti rituals, a *So* is organized and financed by a "rich man" (*nkukuma*) in order to repair a "breach" or "fault" (*nsem*), the consequences of which he and his family are believed to be suffering from. The celebrating community is the organizer's own clan or patrilineage unit. The main initiation camp is located on the outskirts of his village and most of the candidates are members of his clan. The ritual's officiants, called "*So*-bag bearers" (*mfek So*), are those lineage- (or clan-) members possessing a goat-skin bag transmitted from generation to generation and containing, among other things, a lump of fat taken from the sacrificial animals of previous initiations.

² The following, highly simplified, account is based upon a synthesis of the available material on the *So* rite presented in Houseman (1976). The principal sources are: Zenker (1895, translated in Laburthe-Tolra [1970]), Nekes (1911), Heepe (1919), Dugast (1929, of which an expanded version appears in Beartaut [1935]), Atangana (1942), Stoll (1955), Tsala (1958), Azombo (1970) and Laburthe-Tolra (1969; 1985).

Figure 1

The *So* lasts about a year and can be broken down into four main phases associated with different spaces that correspond to varying degrees of dissimulation (see fig. 1). Events taking place in or around the village (phase I and the latter part of phase IV) are for the most part both visible and audible for the uninitiated. Those taking place in the forest (phase II) are neither visible nor audible for them. Those taking place in the intermediate area between the village and the forest, called *afie* (phase III and the former part of phase IV), are in principle audible but not visible.

Phase I. The recurrent theme of this first phase is an ostentatious display of the candidates' inherent aptitude for manhood. This is clear from the very beginning, in the opening "presentation of the candidates" (*meyen mvondo*) during which the novices, made up and dressed in splendid costume by their mothers, dance before the crowd with ferocious expressions and slow majestic movements. It is also apparent in the sequences that follow: public scarification, military exercises in which the candidates, although initially beaten, end up beating and chasing their initiators and/or mounting a mock attack on the village, a meal of honor offered to the novices by their initiators, a collection jointly undertaken by the candidates and the initiators during which the novices are encouraged to behave in an intimidating and swaggering manner, etc. During this initial period lasting several months, the novices are made to conform to the ideal of adult virility: beautiful, courageous, aggressive, "hard", etc. Their innate masculinity is thus publicly proclaimed as providing the grounds for the attainment of adult manhood.

At the end of this time, from the novices' (and the other uninitiated participants') point of view, the hardships of their initiation are

essentially over. They eagerly await a feast of previously forbidden fatty meats as a formal confirmation of their new status. In anticipation of this feast, the novices accompany their initiators on a long hunting trip in the forest.

Phase II. During this several week long hunting trip, the candidates' hazing takes place. Naked, obliged to sleep on the bare ground, forced to imitate sexual intercourse with dead animals, to insult their mother's vagina, etc. they are repeatedly assured by their initiators that the time has come for them to die. Most of the hardships they submit to entail an ironic and painful relationship with objects or activities normally associated with adult men. Many have to do with hunting. For example, a novice is told to catch a hedge-hog hiding in a ditch overlaid with branches; when the boy does so, his hand is bitten by the initiator hiding in the ditch. The candidates, invited on a wild pig hunt, are made to run on all fours, chased by their initiators, for hours. At one point, the novices are led to a hunter's lean-to to "rest", where they are forced to squeeze themselves into a low hut made of thorny vines and built over a bog filled with excrement. In other ordeals, novices are made to "wash" with pepper-filled and dirty water, to pick "kola nuts" by climbing to the top of a tree swarming with poisonous ants, to "forge" by getting their hands crushed, etc. During these humiliating and painful ordeals, the candidates' attributes of adult manhood, so amply demonstrated during the first stage, are systematically and violently denied.

At the end of the hunting/hazing period, the candidates leave the forest to take up residence in an initiation camp which they build just outside the organizer's village. A palm-frond curtain hides the camp from the eyes of the uninitiated. During the public festival that follows, the *ndzom So* celebration, the novices dance in a frenzied and explicitly sexual fashion on a long platform (the *ndzom*) jutting out from this curtain above the heads of the spectators. They are naked and covered with red mahogany powder applied by their sponsors (called "So-fathers"). This, they are told, is to hide the traces of their recent ordeals from the uninitiated, and above all from their mothers who, on this occasion, are publicly congratulated for having produced such obviously magnificent and unambiguously male sons.

Phase III. At dawn, the day after the *ndzom So* festival, the women and children are banished from the village. They set up a temporary camp a small distance away, where they are supposed to make noise by singing, clapping, shouting, etc. The candidates leave the initiation camp to spend the day and the night in the deserted village. During this time, the initiators prepare the sequences of the following

day. They clear a narrow path leading from the initiation camp to a long tunnel which they dig in the ground. They place packets of stinging ants next to the path, and hang bunches of nettles on the tunnel's walls.

Early the next morning, the candidates are told that the time has come for them to partake in the sumptuous feast they have been waiting for, the principal component of which is "So fat". The candidates line up impatiently. They are then informed that they will have nothing to eat, but will instead have to undergo new hardships. Their initiators explain what is to come. A distribution of "So fat" then takes place: each novice is given a spoonful of a disgusting mixture containing, among other things, rotten bananas, the organizers' dried faeces and the fat from the "So bag", that is, from the animals sacrificed during previous initiations.

After this distribution, the candidates are encouraged to run around the village shouting loudly and showing how they will "kill the *So*", before plunging into the nearby forest. There, imitating the grunts and behaviour of wild pigs (so, they are told, the uninitiated won't realize that it is them), they cut directly through the undergrowth, tear up the women's gardens and cover themselves with mud. They then return to the initiation camp for the ritual's climactic moment, the "death of the *So*".

The initiators begin beating the drums and singing the initiation song. The women are told to shout and sing as well; this, they are told, is so as not to hear what is going on. After several false starts, the candidates run, one by one, down the path leading to the tunnel, while certain initiators, standing on either side of the path, shower them with packets of stinging ants. Each candidate is accompanied by his sponsor who encourages him to be brave, and, if he can, to grab the packets of ants in order to throw them back onto the initiators. The candidates then plunge into the tunnel. Upon emerging, each novice runs back to the village crying out "father, father, father...". All the men cheer.

Phase IV. The ritual's final phase consists in a lengthy denouement of what has proceeded. After the "death of the *So*", the candidates split up into small groups to take up residence in secondary initiation camps on the outskirts of their respective villages. They spend their time hunting and eating game that was so far prohibited, and steal food from the villages ("to steal like a candidate" is the idiomatic expression denoting kleptomania). This period of seclusion is characterized by markedly formal and aggressive relations towards the uninitiated, and specifically towards women. The latter are prohibited from seeing the candidates, being forewarned of their coming presence by the hammering of war bells. The mothers, who bring them food every day, calling out "Hey, candidate!" to their sons, are also answered with war bells. The

candidates have the right not only to steal any food they can find, but also to wreck havoc in the village. Such acts of violence are principally aimed at women who, obliged to look away and prohibited from eating anything a novice has touched, are incapable of defending themselves.

After a month or two, the candidates, physically transformed by their rich diet, begin visiting other initiation camps. Disguised by means of false beards, headdresses, etc, they also begin to appear during public celebrations. They are beautiful and aggressive, starting fights whenever possible. After three to six months, they return to live in their respective villages. There, during another three months they are subject to progressively less stringent prohibitions.

The "mahogany powder" (*baa*) festival marks their final reintegration into the community. The candidates assemble in the courtyard of the ritual's organizer's village. Amidst much laughter, their feminine apparel (which the candidates wear during the final phase of their initiation) is stripped away by their classificatory "wives" (women married into their lineage groups), whose clothing is torn off as well. Afterwards, the novices dress themselves in bark-cloth, coat themselves with mahogany powder, and perform a warriors' dance. Their initiation is over.

Concealed and avowed secrecy

These different sequences combine to form a framework for the candidates' transition from one state of being, that of uninitiated male children (exhibited in the opening "presentation of the candidates") to another, that of initiated men (evinced in the closing "mahogany powder" festival). This transition corresponds to a twofold change in relationship. On the one hand, with respect to their initiators, the candidates progress from being the victims of violent and degrading misrepresentations during the hazing period, to being the objects of a fairly benign deceit concerning "So fat", to finally, a close solidarity during the "death of the *So*" and thereafter. On the other hand, the novices' relationship with the uninitiated, and in particular with their mothers, evolves from a state of manifest solidarity during the first phase, to one of tacit imposture during the dance on the *ndzom*, and finally, to a situation of frankly aggressive duplicity before and following the "death of the *So*". These two inverse movements are interwoven in such a way that developments in the one, condition and are conditioned by developments in the other³.

³ Thus, the novices' intense disenchantment during the hunting/hazing period is due to the public demonstrations of solidarity characteristic of the rite's initial phase.

The present section is concerned with trying to sketch out the underlying pattern of this dynamic relationship between relationships. As we will see presently, this pattern is founded upon the integration of two interactive schemes. The one emphasizes the global interplay between the initiated and the uninitiated, the other, the evolving perspective of candidates themselves.

As Figure 1 shows, the ritual can be decomposed into a succession of three stages recalling those classically associated not only with initiation but with other rites of passage as well (Van Gennep 1909). After a preliminary stage, an abrupt separation followed by a prolonged and graduated liminal period leading to a final reintegration. This tripartite design, however, obscures an essential feature of initiation, namely, that the transformative scheme it enacts is a product of something akin to what Bateson (1980 *passim*) called "double description". It stems from the combination of several different points of view. Indeed, the initiators and the uninitiated do not perceive the ritual in the same way. From the initiators' point of view, the hazing period introduces an irreversible break in the candidates' relationship vis-à-vis the uninitiated. This interruption, unbeknownst to the uninitiated, is demonstrated during the *ndzom So* festival by the novices' silence regarding their ordeals. However, for the uninitiated, who are unaware of the hazing episode as such, there exists, on the contrary, a relative continuity between the ritual's first and third phases. From their point of view, the crucial moment of change in their relationship with the candidates takes place during the "death of the *So*" from which they are knowingly excluded. A scheme of the Van Gennep variety is in itself incapable of accounting for this fundamental disparity.

The alternative model proposed here is founded upon a distinction between two types of secrecy, each of which constitutes a discrete three-person system of relationship⁴. In the first of these types, which I will call "concealed secrecy", the secret's addressee, the excluded party, remains unaware of his/her exclusion, being unaware of the secret's existence. In the other type, hereafter referred to as "avowed secrecy", the excluded

Their deception of the uninitiated during the *ndzom So* festival derives, in turn, from the shameful and coercive "revelation", during the hazing period, of the illusory nature of these initial demonstrations, etc.

⁴ Regarding the three-party organisation of secrecy, see Simmel 1950: 330-334. The three positions involved are described by Zempléni (1976) as the secret's *withholder*, its *depository* (to whom it is revealed), and its *addressee* (the excluded party).

party is explicitly informed of his/her exclusion and is therefore fully aware that a secret exists.

The first half of the *So* ritual is, I suggest, organized around a *concealed* secret: the period of dissimulated hazing (phase II), preceded by an initial stage (phase I) that provides the grounds both for the candidates' subsequent disillusionment and for the uninitiated's ongoing misrepresentation of the ensuing sequences. The uninitiated are led to assume, incorrectly, that the activities pursued by the candidates and their initiators (i.e. hazing), although unwitnessed, are nevertheless ordinary and self-evident ones whose nature is well-known to them (hunting).

The second half of the ritual is organized around an *avowed* secret. The episodes leading up to and including the "death of the *So*" during which the uninitiated are banished from the village area (phase III), followed by a period of reclusion (phase IV) during which the consequences of these (for the uninitiated) mysterious episodes are made manifest. The uninitiated, who witness the actions undertaken by the candidates and their initiators in an incomplete fashion (from far away, by hearing only), are led to presume, correctly, that these actions (the "death of the *So*"), the exact nature of which they cannot comprehend, are extraordinary.

These two modes of deception are actualized in different spatio-temporal arrangements. Thus concealed secrecy is based on the fact that there exist two different viewpoints, the existence of which is known only to one party. In the ritual, this entails a sharp separation into two contrasting parts (phases I and II in Figure 1) whose constituent activities take place in non-adjacent spaces: the village and the forest. On the other hand, avowed secrecy is founded upon the shared explicit assumption, that significantly different points of view do exist. Its realisation therefore entails a single series of events (phases III and IV) taking place in adjacent areas (the village, the initiation camp(s), the uninitiated's temporary camp). These events are characterized by a graduated attenuation of dissimulation and concomitantly, a step-by-step transition of the ritual action from the *afie* area to the village. In this way, the spatio-temporal tripartition portrayed in Figure 1, can be seen as the expression of another, more complex, interactive structure specific to the initiation process itself: a concealed secret followed by an avowed one.

However, this overall complementarity between the uninitiated's and the initiators' points of view is but a first approximation. A more complete picture emerges when one takes into account a third perspective, namely that of the candidates themselves, whose initiation consists in the transition from one of these contrasting points of view to the other.

For the candidates, this transition takes place in three steps. Each is composed of a revelation of a secret by the initiators to the candidates, followed by a dissimulation undertaken by the candidates vis-à-vis the uninitiated that corroborates the secret revealed to them by the initiators. These steps are:

(i) the hazing period, followed by the novices' deceitful dance during the *ndzom So* festival,

(ii) the "So fat" episode, followed by the candidates' impersonation of wild animals, and

(iii) the "death of the So", followed by the period of reclusion during which the candidates engage in various subterfuges.

As this series unfolds, the candidates take on an increasingly active role. Thus, during the hazing period, they submit to the initiators in a passive fashion, and their subsequent imposture during the dance on the *ndzom* is an essentially covert one. Then, in the "So fat" episode, after showing how they will "kill the So", the candidates charge through the forest in an imitation of wild pigs that contrasts sharply with the "wild pig hunt" ordeal of the hazing period. Concomitantly, their deception of the uninitiated is more openly aggressive, involving for example the destruction of the women's garden plots. Finally, following the "death of the So", during which the novices are encouraged to turn against their initiators, they answer their mothers by means of war bells and undertake violent forays into to village to steal food or to render it inedible for the uninitiated who stand by helpless.

In this way, the candidates gradually act out the two-fold change in relationship noted earlier. There is, on the one hand, a growing identification with the initiators, whose corresponding attitude towards the novices is one of increasing solidarity among equals, and on the other hand, a progressive differentiation with respect to the uninitiated who react to the candidates' deceptions in an increasingly passive and subordinate fashion.

The first step of this series consists in the revelation of a *concealed* secret (the hazing period) whose existence is kept hidden by a further act of *covert deception* (the candidates' dance on the *ndzom*). In contrast to this, the third step consists in the revelation of an *avowed* secret (the "death of the So"), whose actuality is evinced by additional acts of *overt mystification* (stealth, masquerades, etc). This three-part progression proceeds from a relationship of concealed secrecy to one of avowed secrecy, both with respect to the deceptions revealed to the candidates by their initiators, and with respect to the dissimulations subsequently undertaken towards the uninitiated by the candidates

themselves. In order to understand this development, it is necessary to consider, step by step, the relational changes realized in this series.

Step 1. The initiators disclose a concealed secret to the candidates: the true nature of the hunting/hazing period. This disclosure entails a first modification in the novices' relationship vis-à-vis their initiators. During the dance on the *ndzom* that follows, the candidates' corroborate this secret (and the modification of relationship it entails) by covertly dissimulating the existence of the hazing period from the uninitiated. From the candidates' point of view, this corroboration brings about a first relational change between them and the uninitiated; specifically, it introduces the relationship of concealed secrecy that they act out on this occasion.

Step 2. The initiators disclose a further concealed secret to the candidates: the unsuspected nature of "So fat". Like the preceding revelation of the hazing period, it entails the abrupt disillusionment of previously encouraged false expectations (a lavish feast of forbidden meats). This further disclosure does not in itself imply an additional modification in the relationship between the candidates and their initiators. Rather, it reiterates that introduced in step 1. However, the "So fat" episode occurs *after* the uninitiated have been banished from the village. Consequently, unlike the preceding revelation of the hazing period, it takes place within the context of a relationship of avowed secrecy between the initiators and the uninitiated. The results are not the same. The "So fat" episode itself (whose existence, unwitnessed by the uninitiated, is unknown to them), remains, like the hazing period, a concealed secret. However, the candidates' subsequent demonstrative endorsement of this further concealed secret, unlike their dance on the *ndzom* following the hazing period, becomes an act of avowed secrecy: they rush around the village and through the bush in an intentionally noisy fashion, imitating wild pigs so as to mislead the supposedly listening uninitiated. Indeed, under these conditions, *any* corroborative deception carried out by the novices aimed at the uninitiated can not but take the form of an avowed secret, at once revealed to the candidates and perpetrated by them. Thus, this second instance of corroborative behaviour on the part of the candidates thus effects, for them, a second relational innovation: the introduction of a relationship of avowed secrecy in which an overt association with their initiators and an explicit disassociation from the uninitiated are inexorably conjoined.

Step 3. The initiators disclose a further avowed secret to the candidates: the "death of the *So*". As in the preceding revelation of the wild pig impersonation, the initiators and the candidates together overtly

dissimulate this episode from the uninitiated. For the candidates', this further disclosure does not in itself bring about additional changes, either in their relationship with the initiators or in their relationship with the uninitiated. It merely reiterates, in a more developed fashion, those introduced in step 2. However, for the uninitiated, the situation is not the same. The extent to which the women and children are aware of the novices' destructive imitation of wild pigs is unclear. Be this as it may, from the uninitiated's standpoint, the relationship of avowed secrecy between the candidates and themselves remains, at this point, if it exists, largely implicit. Indeed, from their point of view, this relational modification is introduced and dramatically acted out in the "death of the *So*" episode during which they are made to sing and shout loudly in order, they are told, not to hear what is going on. By participating in this fashion, the uninitiated demonstratively corroborate, as the *excluded* party, the (further) avowed secret revealed by the initiators to the candidates at this time. This corroboration establishes, for the uninitiated, a convergence between the candidates' and the initiators' positions vis-à-vis themselves. This final relational modification (the uninitiated's acknowledgment of the relationship of avowed secrecy between the candidates and themselves on the one hand, and the candidates' acknowledgment of this acknowledgment on the other) is repeatedly confirmed by all concerned in the various intimidating mystifications undertaken by the candidates towards the uninitiated during the period of seclusion that follows (stealing, the use of war bells, etc).

It is the intermediate step of this three-part progression that underlies the transition, for the candidates, from one type of secrecy (concealed) to the other (avowed). As we have seen, step 2 reproduces the interactive pattern characteristic of step 1 (the revelation and subsequent covert dissimulation of a concealed secret) within the novel context of avowed rather than concealed secrecy. In doing so, it provides the foundations for a new interactive pattern (the revelation and subsequent overt dissimulation of an avowed secret) fully realized in step 3. In this respect, this three-part series clearly illustrates the point repeatedly made by Bateson (1972) that change in the pattern of interaction is predicated upon a change in the context of interaction.

In this way, the former and the latter halves of the *So* ritual are articulated, from the candidates' point of view, into a single process. A positive connection is established, for them, between, on the one hand, their passive submission to the ordeals undertaken by their initiators', modeled upon a violent and ironic denial of the novices' innate aptitude for adult manhood, and on the other hand, their own aggressive

subterfuges vis-à-vis the uninitiated following the "death of the *So*", modeled upon an equally ironic denial of the ascendancy inherent in their mothers' (and more generally women's) nurturing role. Specifically, this intermediary step enables the novices to appreciate these subterfuges, in which they withhold an avowed secret from the uninitiated, as at once a necessary consequence and a formal counterpart of their own ordeals during which they acquire a concealed secret from the initiators⁵.

Let me now try to tie these different elements together. The relational structure underlying the performance of the *So* ritual can be understood as the association of the two interactive schemes described above. The first one is founded upon an overall complementarity between the uninitiated's and the initiated's points of view. It consists in a relationship of avowed secrecy, realized in the latter half of the ritual (phases III and IV), preceded by a relationship of concealed secrecy, realized in the former half (phases I and II). This first configuration underlies the mutual accommodation of two radically different appreciations of the candidates' transformation. On the one hand, the uninitiated's unawareness of the hazing period as such leads them to apprehend the novices' metamorphosis as deriving essentially from the partially inaccessible and hence unintelligible actions undertaken by the initiators during the "death of the *So*". On the other hand, the uninitiated's decisive focalization upon this climactic episode, enables the initiated to envisage the novices' metamorphosis as grounded in other events situated at a still further remove from the uninitiated's experience (e.g. the hazing period). The candidates' initiation is thereby rendered, for the initiated, irreducible to a matter of straightforward mystification as performed during the "death of the *So*". The second interactive scheme derives from the candidates' perspective as they move from one of these contrasting points of view towards the other. It consists in the three-step succession of revelations (to them by the initiators) and subsequent dissimulations (by them towards the uninitiated) by which they progress from being the addressees of a concealed secret in the beginning of the ritual, to being the perpetrators of an avowed one at its conclusion.

⁵ In this perspective, it is important to emphasize the continuity that exists between the novices' domineering dissimulations following the "death of the *So*", and the discriminating privileges they assume following to the ritual's conclusion (e.g. eating fatty meats). Such prerogatives constitute a projection, into the realm of everyday interaction, of the avowed secret so amply evinced during the rite's final stages. They represent a further recognition of the relationship of avowed secrecy between the initiated and the uninitiated, in which this relationship, pushed to its logical limits, is actualized as overtly as possible: as banal features of ordinary life.

The interdependence of these two configurations is grounded in a more fundamental interdependence of the two types of secrecy that compose them. On the one hand, the passage from concealed to avowed secrecy realized in the crucial intermediary step 2 of the second scheme, takes place within the framework of a prior relationship of avowed secrecy. On the other hand, this relationship of avowed secrecy is itself preceded, in the first scheme, by a relationship of concealed secrecy. In this way, concealed and avowed secrecy articulate to form a single recursive dynamic in which the one is embedded in the other: the transition from concealed secrecy (phases I and II) to avowed secrecy (phases III and IV) is mediated by the transition, within the framework of avowed secrecy, from concealed to avowed secrecy (step 2). In this respect, the unitary relational form actualized in the *So* ritual establishes a connection of reciprocal presupposition between ordinarily incompatible patterns of interaction. As such, this form is not comparable to the everyday relationships that furnish the normal contexts for propositional communication. Rather, it constitutes a higher-order context underlying the *transformation* of such everyday conditions of relationship.

The identification of this global interactive structure represents a first step towards understanding how ritual events of the *rite de passage* variety, can provide the basis for modifications of behaviour: they enact the relational changes they are purported to effect. However, the problem remains, of the ontological status of the relational changes actualized in the ritual's performance. For those implicated by these transmutations (the initiated, the uninitiated and the candidates) they are not contingent representations but compelling truths. How can this be? After all, acting out a change in relationship is ordinarily, in itself, insufficient grounds for presuming the kind of irreversible metamorphosis which the *So* ritual is held to bring about. What makes the present situation so different? In short, what is it about ritual experience that commits its participants to the relational changes they enact?

Irreducible enactments

The verisimilitude of the transformations depicted in the *So* initiation rite derives, I suggest, from certain key-events occurring at what are, from the standpoints of the various categories of participants, critical junctures in the two-fold relational change acted out during the ritual's performance. This section is concerned with describing these key-events from the uninitiated's, the candidates' and the initiators' points of view.

The uninitiated's point of view. As previously mentioned, uninitiated women play an essential role in the *So*. They dress and make up the candidates for the ritual's opening festival, attend to their ostentatious displays of beauty, courage and strength during the initial phase, dance and are publicly congratulated on the occasion of the novices' appearance on the *ndzom*, provide the candidates with food during their seclusion, all the while assuming an attitude of helplessness when confronted with their formal hostility and stealthy destructiveness, and finally, during the rite's terminal festival, rip off the novices' feminine apparel, thereby heralding their return to normal life as initiated men. From the uninitiated's perspective, the decisive turning point in this involvement occurs during their visual (but not auditory) exclusion prior to and during the "death of the *So*". At this occasion, the positive bond linking the candidates with the uninitiated women (their mothers especially), ostentatiously displayed up to that time, gives way to a new relationship that sets the pattern for the rite's remaining sequences: systematic avoidance characterized by the candidates' open aggressivity and the uninitiated's studied powerlessness.

During this phase, the women and children, banished from the village, set up a temporary camp a small distance away, where they are instructed to shout and sing. This, they are told, is so as not to overhear what is going on in the sequences that follow. In a very different approach from the one developed here, Cohen has emphasized the importance in male initiation rituals in general of such an auditory link between the candidates and the uninitiated. This "profound but empty dialogue of wails and cries" typically marks, as in the present case, the culminating point of the rite. It conveys vividly to the novices their separation from their families of origin: "Cry and wail as they may [...] their mothers and sisters answer yet are powerless to help them. This is the true climax of the initiation ceremony" (Cohen 1964: 542). Be this as it may, it is also, and I suggest, more significantly, the key to the uninitiated's commitment to the metamorphosis this climactic sequence is held to bring about.

In the "death of the *So*", the uninitiated are enjoined to bear witness to those events which, from their point of view, correspond to the very moment of the candidates' mysterious transformation, that is, the pivotal episode following which their relationship with the novices is irremediably altered. At the same time, however, it is essential to the success of this transformation that these critical events remain hidden from them. The problematic character of this activity (namely, how can the uninitiated testify to what they cannot perceive?) is solved by the fact

that they are engaged in the somewhat puzzling activity of having to make noise so as not to hear the noise made by the candidates. The resulting situation is a highly paradoxical one, in which experiential groundedness and conceptual undecidability are indissociably combined: it is because the uninitiated are in communication with the novices (they can hear the candidates' noise) that they are not in communication with them (they make noise so as not to hear), and reciprocally, it is because they are not in communication with the novices (they make noise so as not to hear) that they are in communication with them (the candidates hear their noise). At the same time however, the compulsory nature of this involvement, its dialogical form and the emotional intensity it entails, constrain the uninitiated to acknowledge this mysterious sequence not as a matter of gratuitous theatrics, but as a highly significant, if essentially inexplicable, occasion.

Thus, the uninitiated's participation, far from shedding light upon the nature of the operations hidden from them, establishes a necessary connection between, on the one hand, the irrefutable evidence of their own involvement and the change of relationship with respect to the candidates that this involvement corroborates, and on the other hand, the supposition of a superior, directly inaccessible, order of knowledge, attributable to the initiators and embodied in the mysterious operations they and the candidates are presumed to perform. In this way, the uninitiated's required participation in the "death of the *So*" certifies for them, on an experiential level, the relational change they enact in this episode and in the period of seclusion that follows.

The candidates' point of view. For the candidates, the situation relates to the ordeals they undergo before, and in the case of the "*So fat*" episode, after the *ndzom So* festival. These ordeals are organized around the fact that the candidates are associated, in a derisive and painful fashion, with objects and activities habitually identified with adult men. They correspond to a violent negation of the novices' natural aptitude for manhood. As I have argued elsewhere (Houseman 1986), it seems unlikely that the candidates learn anything in these ordeals. Indeed, as far as empirical knowledge is concerned, there is nothing to learn at all. As the mocking attitude of their initiators suggests, the novices are fully aware of the differences between a kola tree and an ant tree, between clean and dirty water, between chasing and being chased, etc. Similarly, the relative poverty of most of these episodes insofar as their potential for symbolic evocation is concerned, casts doubt upon the notion that they enable the candidates to reflect upon certain "axiomatic" concepts of their culture (Turner 1964:151-2). Indeed, it seems more profitable to

envisage this hazing the other way round: not as providing a context for the contemplation of cultural categories, but as associating cultural categories in such a way as to create a new context.

To begin with, these ordeals juxtapose elements (ant and kola trees, cleaning oneself and dirtying oneself, accession to manhood and unmanly behavior, delicious and revolting foods, etc) which are either arbitrarily associated or explicitly antithetical. As a result, the equations proposed can in no way be deduced from an analysis of the elements themselves. From this point of view, they make no sense. Moreover, this hazing has the further peculiarity of being both physically and psychically painful, and so designed that the novices' very own initiatives bring about the torments they endure. As a result, these ordeals are indisputably grounded, but in such a way as to preclude an unproblematic appreciation of their apparently arbitrary or absurd basis. In other words, for those who endure these ostensibly senseless ordeals, the inherent immediacy and seriousness of the seemingly self-inflicted pain they entail, renders them at once undismissable and unintelligible in terms of a meta-propositional frame of the type "This is play". The candidates are thus denied the means of a definite conceptual interpretation of the experiences they so unmistakably undergo⁶.

Subsequent events, however, lead the novices to envisage these experiences as being, on the contrary, highly significant. The idea that they are, in some elusive way, not as absurd as they seem, is notably substantiated by the modifications in the candidates' relationship with the uninitiated that take place in the sequences immediately following them. These modifications are, in step 1, the novices' covert occultation of the hazing period during the *ndzom So* festival, and in step 2, their overtly misleading destructive run through the forest after the "So fat" episode. As we have seen, from the candidates' standpoint, the relational changes acted out in these sequences are directly linked to the ordeals that precede them and the relational changes with respect to their initiators that are actualized in these ordeals. However, insofar as these mysterious events remain unintelligible in any obvious sense, to ascribe them any significance leads to imagine that there is a higher, extraordinary level of

⁶ Bateson is surely the first anthropologist to have commented upon the absence of conceptual closure in the case of initiatory ordeals. Thus, in a regrettably short comment, he observes in passing that "this leads us to the recognition of a more complex form of play; the game which is constructed not upon the premise 'This is play' but rather around the question 'Is this play?'. And this type of interaction also has its ritual forms, e.g. in the hazing of initiation" (1955 [in 1972:182]).

meaning at which immediate inconsistencies are transcended. This superior order of truth, indescribable in propositional terms, is accessible solely by means of these equivocal experiences themselves.

The initiators' point of view. From the standpoint of the initiators who direct these sequences, the candidates' ordeals, like the "death of the *So*", are in no way paradoxical: they remain potentially accountable in terms of ordinary if somewhat obscure patterns of behaviour, as instances of (successful) intimidation, mystification, or even as a particularly sadistic type of "play". This interpretation, however, is made difficult to sustain by two events that implicate the initiators alone. These events involve the coercive manipulation, not of persons (candidates and uninitiated), but of objects.

Towards the beginning of the rite, before the hazing period, the initiators withdraw to the forest, to cut down the tree that will be made into the *ndzom*. On this occasion, the tree is said to obey the unusual instructions that the initiators collectively shout at it. In accordance with their vociferations, the tree falls in a direction contrary to the one in which it leans and without any noise. Towards the end of the rite, following the "death of the *So*", the initiators sacrifice a castrated goat designated by the name Oyomo. A part of its fat is placed within the "*So* bags" of the rite's officiants. This fat, combined with equivalent bits of fat taken from the sacrificial animals of previous initiations, constitutes the essential component of the "*So* fat" which will be consumed by the novices in subsequent initiations. The animal is staked out in the forest during the hazing period; during the *ndzom So* festival, it is installed in the initiation cabin with the candidates, and is fattened as much as possible. Oyomo is slaughtered in a highly peculiar fashion; it is carved, or according to other accounts, torn from limb to limb while still alive. If the goat cries out, the ritual is considered invalid and must be started over.

The initiators are fully aware that the seemingly miraculous behaviour of the *ndzom*-to-be and the goat Oyomo in fact results from their own artifices. Thus, the trunk of the tree is tied by creepers, and the goat's food is poisoned. The apparent absurdity inherent in this situation (the solemn execution of at once strictly prescribed, unnecessary and obviously unconvincing tricks) is belied by two considerations.

The first consists in an "internal" circularity. It concerns the passage, mediated by these objects, from relational changes between the initiators and the candidates realized in the latter's ordeals, to the corroborative relational changes between the candidates and the uninitiated acted out in the sequences that follow them: first, the novices'

deceitful dance on the *ndzom* after the hazing period, and second, their aggressive impersonation of wild pigs subsequent to the ingestion of "So fat". The actualization of these transitions incites the initiators to appreciate the mysterious simulations surrounding the fabrication of these objects as more than the spurious tricks they might appear to be, that is, to invest them with extra-ordinary meaning.

A further consideration relates to an "external" circularity. Given that the initiators' ability to act as the agents of the candidates' initiation derives from their own initiation, their intervention constitutes a corroboration of their own transformation, brought about by a previous performance of the *So* rite. It follows that, to the degree that the procedures undertaken by them in the candidates' initiation are recognizable as similar to those undertaken for them in their own (older initiators obviously play an important role here), these operations, regardless of their partial inscrutability, may be presumed to be significant⁷. In this way, the mandatory character of these manipulations, unaccountable in any obvious sense, may be held to be demonstrative of a higher, undescribable order of significance embodied in these simulations and attributable, by way of recursive trajectories encompassing the initiators' own initiations, to these conventional enactments themselves.

General remarks. To sum up, at crucial junctures in the rite's development, the candidates, the uninitiated and the initiators are involved in emotionally charged, seemingly paradoxical enactments in which, in the light of subsequent developments, the demonstrable limit of their own understanding is indissociably linked with the postulate of a further, superior order of meaning or authority. For the uninitiated, these key-events concern above all step 3 of the three-step progression described in the previous section, and correspond to the disclosure (by the initiators to the candidates) and dissimulation (by the candidates and the initiators) of an avowed secret. For the candidates they take place in steps 1 and 2 of this progression, and consist in the disclosure (by the initiators) and subsequent dissimulation (from the uninitiated) of concealed secrets. For the initiators', these key-events concern the prepa-

⁷ Such reasoning would seem to be intrinsic to these preparatory procedures. Consider for example the Oyomo goat's silence, held to be indicative of the candidates' successful initiation. Insofar as the latter is ascribable to the novices' ingestion of "So fat" whose essential ingredient is the fat taken from the Oyomo goats of preceding initiations, this silence consecrates the meaningfulness of Oyomo's silences on these previous occasions; this consecration, in turn, authenticates the presumed meaningfulness of Oyomo's silence in the case at hand.

ratory measures and confirmatory divination rites that frame this three-part progression, and at the same time provide the material objects that mediate the transition from concealed to avowed secrecy that this progression entails.

In this way, the "death of the *So*", the ordeals, and the felling of the *ndzom* and the killing of Oyomo, take on, for the uninitiated, the candidates and the initiators respectively, a decidedly transcendental quality: they become irreducible to the actions that compose them. As such, these events irrevocably validate, for these different categories of participants, the changes of relationship realized in and/or following from their performance. Indeed, to the extent that these observable changes are accountable in reference to such unquestionably grounded experiences embodying extra-ordinary, ineffable verities, they are undeniable. It is these "transcendental moments" (Kapferer 1979a:14) that provide the participants with an experientially anchored basis for assuming the discontinuity mediated by the ritual's performance, that is, the presumed incomensurability of the novices' pre- and post-initiation identities. The relational innovations mediated by the rite's performance are thus rendered recognizable as being neither contingent depictions nor fraudulent mystifications, but accurate fulfillments of the way things are meant to be.

Conclusion

The actors' commitment to the transformations of status effected by ritual performance extends beyond the ritual frame. I have tried to show how this can be explained by the participants' involvement in the changes of relationships acted out within this frame. I have treated ritual effectiveness as a consequence of some *formal* properties of ritual experience. It is considered here as distinct from functional considerations entailing causal linkages between ritual performance and other large-scale organizational features of society (e.g. Young 1965). It is also, I suggest, compatible with, yet not reducible to the micro-phenomena of cognition and communication which constrain the transmission of cultural representations (e.g. Sperber 1985, Barth 1987, Boyer 1990). Indeed, this perspective implicitly argues for an approach to ritual phenomena founded upon the recognition of dynamic relational structures intrinsic to their enactment as a whole. Such structures may be thought of as having two main characteristics:

(i) they are *interactive*. In other words, they are predicated upon the complementary articulation of dissimilarities between the points of view assignable to the various categories of participants;

(ii) they are *complex*, that is to say, they integrate ordinarily incompatible relational patterns into novel, higher-order configurations of interdependency.

In the case of the *So* ritual, this complex interactive structure is founded upon the interdependent articulation of concealed and avowed secrecy. Specifically, it consists in the transition from a relationship of concealed secrecy to one of avowed secrecy within the overall framework of a relationship of avowed secrecy. Implicit here is the idea that this embedded configuration represents a simplified and highly formalized expression of the comprehensive relational conditions that constrain the effectiveness not only of the *So* rite, but of male initiation rituals in general. The family of possible ceremonial forms that this hypothesis suggests ranges from "one-off" rituals similar to, or even simpler than the one described here, to ongoing, graded initiation systems in which a lengthy series of increasingly restrictive concealed secrets are successively revealed within the framework of an increasingly deep, multi-layered and vital relationship of avowed secrecy (e.g. Barth 1975).

I have also tried to show how the changes of relationship acted out in the *So* ritual are convincing not because they entail a definite conceptualization of the terms involved, but on the contrary, because they engage the participants in experientially grounded "traps for thought" (Smith 1979:140) in which definite conceptualization is rendered impossible. The participants' involvement in these events commits them, not only to the extraordinary character of the rite's performance, but also, in an *a posteriori* but nonetheless irrefutable fashion, to the relational modifications this performance enacts, and hence, to the INITIATED/UNINITIATED dichotomy mediated by these modifications. These key-events concern what would appear to be regular features of male initiation:

(i) a compulsory involvement by the uninitiated in a reciprocal auditory but not visual communication with the candidates and the initiators;

(ii) painful and disorienting "senseless" ordeals undergone by the candidates;

(iii) simulative manipulations by the initiators of objects relating to the rite's preparation and/or to divinatory rituals held to confirm its successful accomplishment.

The conceptual undecidability that this commitment entails takes a different form depending upon the nature of the participants concerned. For the uninitiated, it corresponds to an admitted lack of information, the acknowledgment of an explicit exclusion. For the initiators, it resides in a

circular relationship between the actions they undertake and their ability to undertake them. For the candidates, it consists in an irreducible arbitrariness, at once symptom and sign of the radical and irreversible break entailed by their passage from one of these points of view to the other.

To conclude, I would like to briefly consider two issues. The first concerns the marginal role played by "symbolism" in the present account. What is the connection between the relational structure described here and the symbolic evocations invariably entailed by the actions, utterances, objects, etc., involved in its realization? This is a difficult question requiring a distinction between two very different aspects of ritual symbolism.

On the one hand, certain elements of the rite's performance may be said to designate, for the participants, the higher-order, extraordinary context (or certain aspects of it) that this performance actualizes. Such collectively recognized "emergent symbols", as they may be called (for example, more or less anything that can be qualified as being "of the *So*" such as "*So* fat", the "*ndzom So*", etc.), are generated by the ritual experience itself (cf. Houseman and Severi 1988). Their meaningfulness as such relates, in an auto-referential and inherently indefinite fashion, to the presumed effectiveness of the ritual enactment of which they are a part. It in no way relies upon the nature of the elements employed.

On the other hand, these same elements (or others) may be interpreted, more or less systematically, in terms of definite "meanings" relating to practices and values external to the performance. To take a single, simplified example, there exists for the Beti a close connection between fat and semen. Not only are these substances recognized as physically similar, they are also held to derive from each other. A baby's fat is produced by her father's semen, (Mallart-Guimera 1977: 38) and conversely, a castrated animal is said to become fatter because its semen (secreted in the chest) can no longer be stored in the testicles (Ombolo 1974: 224). In the light of this FAT = SEMEN equation, it would be possible to construe the candidates' ingestion of so-called "*So*-fat" and subsequent passage through a tunnel as a symbolic enactment of the process of procreation. However, as I have shown, the transformative capacity of the ritual enactments in which these elements intervene, does not depend upon the symbolic imagery that such elements may occasion, but upon certain formal features and relational entailments of the enactments themselves. From this point of view, "extrinsic symbolism" of this kind (e.g., an identification of "*So* fat" with sperm) represents an optional, inherently variable phenomenon, in which conventional

metaphor (Keesing, this volume), ontological presumptions (Atran, Boyer, this volume), and private interpretative schemes all play a significant role.

I am not suggesting here that ritual symbolism is unimportant, but only that it is essentially contingent insofar as ritual effectiveness is concerned. Symbolic evocations ascribable to the *So* rite are either intrinsic to the overall relational structure its performance enacts ("emergent symbols"), in which case they are auto-referential and conceptually indefinite, or they have definite referential and conceptual content ("extrinsic symbolism"), but remain subordinate to this global structural dynamic.

A second, related issue concerns the nature of the *commitment* entailed by ritual experience. Meaningful participation in the *So* rite is informed, not a by definite conceptualization of the categories it articulates (BOY, MAN, WOMAN, CHILD, ADULT, etc), but by its absence. It follows that this commitment does not concern specific substantive features attributable to these categories. Rather, it concerns a special type of relationship between such terms that is irreducible to the sum of particular features attributable to the terms themselves. A similar point is made by T. Turner (1973), about the ritual transition from the status/role category BOY to that of MAN. These categories may be thought of as a classification constructed of combinations of features of role relationship: sex, age, as well as other, more complex features entailing linkages with other role contrasts (BACHELOR/SPOUSE, MOTHER'S CHILD/FATHER'S CHILD, etc). It is the sum of these roles and their features that constitute the total matrix of role relations involved in the BOY/MAN contrast. An initiation ritual, however, does not consist in such an operation of re-classification, but in a "more powerful", transformative one in which the recognition of specific contrastive features is subordinate to a higher-order, processural connection between the categories to which these features may be assigned.

I would argue that this higher-order dynamic relationship implies a *hierarchical* integration of human sexual identities. As Bourdieu (1981:206) points out with regard to rites of passage in general, the candidates' transition from an uninitiated to an initiated state operates at the same time an implicit separation between the "initiable" and the "uninitiable", in our example, between those naturally destined to undergo the *So* (the males) and those who, by virtue of their (female) nature, are excluded from ever doing so. In other words, it consecrates the sexual dichotomy in terms of a common, discriminatory reference not to the experience of birth but to that of initiation. In this way, the candi-

dates' transition from natal to ritual masculinity does not consist in a simple amplification of an initial sexual distinction, but in the encompassment of this dichotomy by a further distinction mediated by the ritual itself, that between initiated and uninitiated. The joint fulfillment of adult sexuality is thereby made dependant upon a ritual enactment controlled by men. This corresponds to a hierarchical ordering of male and female sexual identity in which the formal preeminence of gender over sex and of masculinity over femininity are indissociably conjoined⁸. Observable genital-linked sexual *difference* is thereby instituted as a significantly and appropriately human (and specifically Beti) *discrimination*, legitimately informed by local socio-cultural determinations in which male sexual identity occupies a logically superordinate role⁹.

The participants' commitment to this hierarchical relationship is realized, on the manifest level, as the observance of a specific set of behavioral rules. The norms these rules define relate to the performance of the *So* ritual and to prerogatives and duties connected with it: the ability or not to eat fatty meats, the right or not to marry certain people, etc., as well as the aptitude, by virtue of one's own initiation, to initiate

⁸ Moisseff (1987) has argued that this hierarchical ordering can be profitably viewed as an inversion of the "natural" asymmetry with respect to the production of children of both sexes. As I have suggested elsewhere (Houseman 1985a), this subordination of sex to gender is clearly expressed in the ontological inversion implied by the differences in the demonstrations of the candidates' sexual identity occurring at the beginning and at the end of the ritual. Thus, whereas in the opening "presentation of the candidates", the latter's masculinity is dramatized by means of a formal imposition of cultural signs (dress, make up, facial expressions, bodily attitudes, etc.), in the terminal "mahogany powder" festival, it is revealed by means of an informal exhibition of biological indices. Thus, the novices' genital-linked sexuality, although temporally and logically prior (only male children are initiated), is displayed as being essentially contrived, reducible to a set of conventional attributes; in contrast to this, their ritually mediated gender identity is overtly confirmed as a self-evident fact of nature.

⁹ Elsewhere (Houseman 1984), I have outlined the particular form of hierarchical relationship (Dumont 1979) entailed by this encompassment of masculine/feminine by initiated/uninitiated, and have discussed, in a general way, the conceptual constraints that this hierarchical relationship would seem to imply (Houseman 1985b, 1988). Space prevents me from pursuing these questions further here. Suffice it to remark that it does not, in itself, entail the ascription of any particular substantive qualities to either masculinity or femininity. Rather, it introduces, independently of such qualities, a formal asymmetry between these terms. This overall constraint upon the representation of the male/female opposition gives rise to ideological discriminations of the type "certain adults (male) are more adult than others (female)", which cannot be deduced from representations of male and female sexual identity alone.

others. They do not constitute typical features of man-, woman-, childhood, etc., but necessary features of the initiated/uninitiated dichotomy itself.

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